

# **TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND ITS FUTURE ROLE IN THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ARENA**

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Public transit agencies (PTAs) continually strive to refine their services, increase the customer base, improve public support and image, and obtain funding necessary to maintain and improve services. With the expansion of suburban development patterns and other changing conditions, serving the traveling public with fixed route bus transit becomes increasingly challenging.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this study was to investigate current conditions in the application of telecommunications to Travel Demand Management (TDM) programs that support public transportation statewide. Researchers investigated rates of telecommuting, the impact of telecommuting on travel behavior, and technological innovations that may lead to a new role for state DOTs and local transportation planning departments, in addition to broader telecommuting applications and opportunities for transit agencies. As part of this effort, researchers conducted a survey of PTA general managers to ascertain the present and planned level of involvement by transit agencies to provide telecommunications-related services. Researchers also investigated business trends, regarding telecommunications and telecommuting, and recent government initiatives.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study provides a review of the literature regarding rates of telecommuting, the impact of telecommuting on travel, recent developments in the field of telecommunications as they relate to transportation, and existing roles of government regarding the use of telecommunications for transportation purposes. Data from three sources indicate that telecommuting has been increasing during the last twenty years. There is some evidence that telecommuting and telecommerce have the effect both of increasing and of decreasing trip making. What seems clear is that telecommuting and telecommerce have great potential to impact both personal and commercial travel behavior in complex ways that differ from one region to another.

Considering that there is an interest in evolving PTAs from the role of bus system operators to the role of mobility managers, researchers particularly examined the existing attitudes of transit agency top managers regarding their agencies' potential roles as providers of telecommunications-related services. A Public Transit Development Survey was given to 290 transit agency general managers nationwide, and the general results from the 44 responses indicate that just a few transit agencies are currently involved in or are considering telecommunications-related services as a mobility management strategy.

According to survey results, transit agency heads do not see it as their role to provide computer and Internet access to the public because schools and public libraries are perceived to have taken the lead in this area. Other agencies cited lack of funding and authority to take a lead role, observing that such

mobility management services involving telecommunications could only ever be considered supplementary to the core mission of providing bus service.

Researchers observed that in the private sector, businesses might start out providing a particular product or service and then, as the company matures, begin to diversify into other areas of business for the purposes of maintaining growth and maximizing profits. Ultimately, the key products and services may be different from those the company provided initially. According to its *Community-Oriented Growth* scenario, the American Public Transit Association's M21 Task Force foresees a revolution occurring in transit services, which will result in transit systems that are "entrepreneurial" and that move "into profitable lines of business."

If transit agencies were to view themselves as mobility managers first, then opportunities to diversify their services, such as with telecommunications initiatives (and other strategies), could be viewed as potential means to better accomplish their missions. It seems implausible that other mobility management strategies could ever replace bus service. Bus transit will probably always be a critical service, but, in the future, other functions may take an important place within a menu of services that better meets the mobility needs of customers. In order for this change to take place, most transit agencies will need some assistance.

## **BENEFITS**

This study has revealed the general lack of regard that PTAs have for the potential uses of telecommunications within the structure of their current operations and services. Telecommunications is viewed as being beyond the purview of their responsibilities. A potential benefit of this research would be to stimulate the interest of PTAs in the uses of telecommuting strategies to broaden their range of services and to employ telecommunications as an alternative to the single occupant vehicle commute.

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